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THE NECESSITY FOR INTERNATIONAL LABOUR ORGANISATION

By E. J. PHELAN

An Address delivered to the League of Nations Union Summer School, Geneva, August, 1923

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Box 627

LEAGUE OF NATIONS UNION
15 GROSVENOR CRESCENT, S.W.1

ONE PENNY

The Necessity for International Labour Organisation

Industry the Most International of Modern Affairs

COMPARED with the slow developments of one kind or another which have taken place during the history of humanity, industrial development is a thing which is exceedingly recent. It is not only a thing which is exceedingly recent, it is also a thing which has taken place with extraordinary rapidity. Little more than sixty or seventy years ago industrial civilisation, as we know it, did not exist. Modern industrial civilisation, when it came, went too fast to be controlled effectively by those who were responsible for the welfare of the countries in which it developed. It went too fast because it became international, because it became dependent on international circumstances and international relations.

If you take the simplest thing which any of you have with you to-day—a hat, or a boot, or any other ordinary object—and you attempt to trace all the roots which it has in the industrial organisation of the world, you would touch almost every country on the globe. The wool in your overcoat comes from Australia, the buttons probably from Czechoslovakia. But that is not all. The textile machinery which wove the cloth may have been manufactured in England, but whence came the steel or the ore that went to its making, whence the window frames in the factory, the chemicals in the paints or the dyes, whence the multitude of elements and parts that make up the apparatus of manufacture and all the mechanisms of transport and distribution. Modern industry is the most international thing the world has ever known. Diseases of modern industry are therefore international, and it began to be realised about sixty or seventy years ago that to attempt to remedy industrial diseases by means of national remedies would not suffice.

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Dangers of Industry—National Efforts to Eradicate Phossy-Jaw Failed

Some of you are familiar with the historical example, the example of white phosphorus. Large industries grew up in various countries for the purpose of manufacturing matches. Matches were manufactured with white phosphorus. It is poisonous. Workers handling white phosphorus absorb a certain amount of phosphorus through the skin and under the nails from the dust which comes in contact with them, and it produces a loathsome and terrible disease. There is no means of preventing that disease if the worker handles white phosphorus. There is apparently a simple method of saving the worker's life and preserving him from disfigurement—that is, by seeing you do not use white phosphorus. You must make your matches of something else. It is possible to do this. Matches can be made of red phosphorus, which is chemically identical. When that was realised there arose a difficulty and the difficulty was this: If you use red phosphorus to make matches, it costs a little more, and in pre-war days, when international competition was exceedingly keen, if we in England, for example, had said for humanitarian reasons "You must use red phosphorus, not white phosphorus," the cost of manufacture in England would have been slightly higher than in, say, Sweden or Japan, and English matches would have been driven out of the international market. The result would be this. Quite true—you would have preserved the worker from death and disease by phosphorous poisoning, but you might have put him in very great danger of death and disease from unemployment or starvation.

International Effort Succeeded

It thus became clear that a national remedy was no remedy at all; that no remedy could be found except an international remedy whereby all the States who manufactured matches with white phosphorus would agree to manufacture matches with red phosphorus. In these conditions, matches would, perhaps, cost a fraction of a penny per thousand gross more than they previously cost, but the match manufacturing

States would remain in exactly the same situation as regards international competition. This is the simplest example, but the same argument is true as regards all social and industrial reforms. The same argument is true as regards the employment of women in dangerous trades. If you propose in England to forbid the employment of women in certain trades because they are considered dangerous for women, there is immediately an obstacle. There is immediately an argument which is brought against you by those who say "We quite agree, it is humane—we are not against it. We are perfectly willing it should be done, but we shall lose our place on the international market and in competition with countries who do employ women in these processes."

Take another case, the employment of children. When it was proposed in England some time ago that children be kept at school until 14 years of age the same arguments were presented. Industries which employed child labour were in competition with industries in China, in Japan, in India. And it must be remembered that countries like China and India are becoming industrialised very rapidly indeed, and count more every day as important factors in international competition.

Thus it became clearer and clearer that there was no solution to such difficulties except an international solution, that social progress would tend to come to a stop unless you got social progress to take place all over the world at the same time, internationally, on the same basis. It is not, however, necessary that conditions, for instance, in Japan and India should be brought abruptly up to the same level of advancement as in Great Britain, but it is necessary if you wish to improve conditions in the advanced countries that there should be some machinery by which you can get an equivalent improvement elsewhere.

That, briefly, is the reason why it was necessary that something should be done, and why was it necessary that it should be done in the form of the apparently complicated international constitution which now exists as the International Labour Organisation?

The Complexity of International Machinery

If it seems complicated and its progress seems slow, we must look a little closer at its problems before we condemn it. It is not, perhaps, realised what a very curious thing a community of nations is. It is not, perhaps, obvious that you cannot deal with nations in the comparatively simple way one deals with people. Problems between fellow citizens of one country can be solved immediately, or, at all events, very rapidly. Take the simplest and the first step towards solving any problem which affects any group or any two groups of national interests. The first thing everybody attempts to do is to get a meeting between them. There is no particular obstacle. In the solution of an international problem the first step is the same step, but it is infinitely more difficult. There was previous to the Treaty of Versailles no machinery by which a meeting between States could be obtained. You may ask what is the difficulty? The difficulty is this—that as you go up in the scale of importance of political institutions their relations become more difficult and delicate and also more dangerous. Take a very simple example. If you are walking down the street and a newsboy jostles against you and you give him a cuff and knock off his cap, nothing serious happens. But if you knock off the hat of a city business man there may ensue a heated discussion. If pursuing the experience you dislodge a policeman's helmet you will probably pay a fine and, if it were the King's hat (which is called a crown) the act would be called high treason and the penalty would be death. Thus the simplest relations between States, which are the highest forms of communities, are likely to be regarded as adventurous and, therefore, not to be lightly undertaken. If you invite a friend to dinner and he refuses, no great harm is done. But if Switzerland invites France to a conference and France refuses, Switzerland is met with what is called a "diplomatic rebuff," which is an exceedingly serious thing in international politics. These parallels may perhaps explain why the great difficulty previous to the Peace Treaty was the impossibility of getting countries to come together to consider industrial questions. It is true that difficulty was over-

come. It is true we did get a White Phosphorus Convention. But how? First of all it was necessary to find some country which would have sufficient humanitarian interest and sufficient international courage to invite other countries to come to a conference. There were failures, but finally the Swiss Government—and for that reason it is peculiarly appropriate that the International Labour Office should be in Switzerland—did have the courage to invite other countries to come to a conference and discuss what could be done internationally to get rid of the horror—phosphorus poisoning. But it was not easy. Countries were suspicious and wanted guarantees. You will remember a recent similar experience when the late President Harding tried to call the Disarmament Conference at Washington; there was six months' preliminary correspondence, because the States wanted all kinds of assurances as to what would be and would not be discussed before they would agree to come. That Conference in fact almost broke down before it had met. While the Swiss Government got a meeting to deal with white phosphorus the States were still hesitating. They would not send plenipotentiaries; they sent technical experts, and the technical experts sat in conference for a month or five weeks and they arrived at certain technical conclusions of scientific interest, but which were legally of no importance whatever. Then the Swiss Government again entered into a long correspondence in order that the Governments might be persuaded to send diplomatic representatives who would turn these technical conclusions into the form of a treaty, because what was necessary was a contract between the States whereby they would be reciprocally bound to abolish the use of white phosphorus—a treaty.

This briefly was the reason which made it necessary at the Peace Conference to get some other kind of machinery to cope with the problems which accompanied the rapid growth of modern industry. It was obviously impossible to settle them with sufficient speed if it was going to take two or three years to get a conference, and if after the conference was over nothing was to remain—because once the Berne conference had met and dispersed nothing remained. Thus the institution of an international organisation to deal with the problems which have now been confided to the International Labour Organisation became a material and a practical necessity.

But there was another reason—a moral reason—which explains the presence of the Labour Charter in the Peace Treaty. It is difficult now, and it is becoming extremely difficult, to picture the psychological state of Europe at the time the Peace Treaty was negotiated. There have been many currents and cross-currents and changes and developments, political, industrial and social, since. But apart from them and considering only what may be called the psychological relation between States and the mass of their citizens, it may be said that there existed at Paris, even among diplomats—who are, perhaps, least susceptible in that respect—a genuine sentiment that the Governments owed to labour a special debt. There was a recognition, not only of the supreme offering of the dead, but of responsibility to the living who must return to industry and of the effort and sacrifice of the women who had manned the factories in the absence of the men. There was an honest desire to take what international measures were possible to make the world a better place to work and live in.

The International Labour Organisation in the Peace Treaties

It was for these two reasons that it was decided to write into the Treaty of Peace the constitution of an organisation which would provide the machinery for the constant consideration and for constant effort to ameliorate the conditions of labour. And so you get in the Treaty of Versailles, for the first time in the long history of great international treaties, the word "Labour." You get the word "Labour" and a whole chapter devoted to what was to be done on behalf of labour, which opens with a very remarkable preamble, a preamble so remarkable that in the mass of those extremely dry and technical documents which are called treaties it appears almost as

incongruously as a passage from "Alice in Wonderland." It reads as follows:—

> "Whereas the League of Nations has for its object the establishment of universal peace, and such a peace can be established only if it is based upon social justice;
>
> "And whereas conditions of labour exist involving such injustice, hardship and privation to large numbers of people as to produce unrest so great that the peace and harmony of the world are imperilled; and an improvement of those conditions is urgently required; as, for example, by the regulation of the hours of work, including the establishment of a maximum working day and week, the regulation of the labour supply, the prevention of unemployment, the provision of an adequate living wage, the protection of the worker against sickness, disease and injury arising out of his employment, the protection of children, young persons and women, provision for old age and injury, protection of the interests of workers when employed in countries other than their own, recognition of the principle of freedom of association, the organisation of vocational and technical education and other measures;
>
> "Whereas also the failure of any nation to adopt humane conditions of labour is an obstacle in the way of other nations which desire to improve the conditions in their own countries;
>
> "The HIGH CONTRACTING PARTIES, moved by sentiments of justice and humanity as well as by the desire to secure the permanent peace of the world, agree to the following:—"

One perhaps too often thinks of the Treaty of Versailles as a very businesslike and very commercial document in which frontiers and nationalities and minorities were fought over and compromised upon and sometimes, perhaps, bartered and cross-bartered, and one forgets that there was also, in addition to the necessity of finding settlements acceptable to the actual negotiating parties, an endeavour to find an inter-

national expression of a certain number of high human ideals, of which the Preamble to Part XIII is an example. It is, indeed, a magnificent pronouncement, but it will be realised that it is a very difficult preamble to put into operation, a very difficult programme to fulfil. It will be realised when the work and the results are examined in detail that the International Labour Organisation is functioning, or trying to function, in conditions for which it was never designed. The statesmen who met at Paris in 1919 could not foresee, and could not be expected to foresee, the present economic state of Europe.

I drew attention above to an historical example—the white phosphorus treaty—where the difference of a small fraction of a *1d.* on a thousand gross of matches was enough to create considerable disturbance in the international market. But in a Europe in which exchanges, instead of moving as they did in 1912–13–14, by a decimal point, jump a million or two million in a night, that economic argument loses a great deal of its force. It is still true that the conditions under which a certain product is manufactured—conditions and hours of labour, rates of wages, the question as to whether you can employ women and children at night or during certain hours, or on certain processes—are still elements in the international competition which the sale of that article may have to encounter. But other elements, which in 1914 were comparatively stable, and which are now far from stable, play a part to-day which greatly overshadows them. Therefore the original international argument for the stabilisation, the uniformisation and the equivalence of labour conditions has very largely lost its force.

Achievements of the I.L.O. Amidst Unexpected Difficulties

Nevertheless, results have been obtained. And it is interesting to note that results have been obtained rather in the fields where they were least expected. In Paris it was thought it would be comparatively easy to secure standardisation of labour conditions between the advanced countries in Europe,

and that the second task of the International Labour Organisation, the task of securing progress in the backward countries, of securing humane conditions of labour in countries where, so to speak, no conditions existed at all, would be infinitely more difficult. But, as the result of the economic chaos in Europe, success has been greater in the Eastern countries than in Europe itself, and the International Labour Office can point with very great satisfaction to the new Indian Factory Act, to new labour legislation in Japan, to the beginnings of labour legislation in China and to certain minor but successful interventions which it has been able to make in countries like Persia. But if the results in Europe are less than were expected in 1919, results of another order have been achieved which, if difficult to set down statistically, are, nevertheless, real, and worthy of special attention.

The International Labour Office can be proud of the fact that during the progressive economic chaos which has ensued since the Treaty of Peace, a period during which it might be expected there would be perpetual friction between employers and workers, a period in which wages are fixed to-day and the cost of living is doubled to-morrow, it has kept a measure of confidence and a degree of hope. The last three years in Europe have been years of industrial unrest and industrial friction on a scale which, perhaps, it would be difficult to parallel. The number of cases in which there have been serious strikes, in which the labour movement, the constitutional labour movement on which modern industry is constructed, has found itself in external or internal conflict, are innumerable, and the International Labour Office may congratulate itself that in spite of its not having yet been able to achieve any great measure of the results which it was hoped it would achieve in Europe, it has, nevertheless, kept in the Annual Conference and in the Governing Body the workers' representatives and the employers' representatives, and that while differing, as might be expected, and tenaciously contesting their respective points of view they have, nevertheless, in the vast majority of cases, after discussion come to unanimous or almost unanimous conclusions.

Even if, materially, less has been so far achieved than was hoped for, the result just recorded is a spiritual achievement of great importance. It proves that the solution of modern industrial problems is most easily sought and most successfully found internationally. The International Labour Office has, perhaps, preserved from extinction that atmosphere of sympathetic understanding which seemed for a moment at the end of the war to have emerged from its horrors, but which has since suffered eclipse. A striking example is worth much argument. It was a very dramatic thing to see sitting round the council table of the International Labour Office a few weeks ago twenty-four representatives of disabled men's associations from all over the world, and at a moment when the British Press and the French Press were filled with articles of mutual suspicion and when the Franco-German problem seemed more insoluble than ever, to find, working in complete harmony and arriving at unanimous conclusions, representatives of the men who had faced one another in the trenches, and to identify in that unanimity representatives of Germany, Czechoslovakia, Poland, France, Belgium, New Zealand, Australia, Canada and Great Britain. However much the International Labour Office may have failed in securing the full measure of the success that was hoped for in 1919, such achievements are more than a justification of its existence.

The Will to Civilisation

The world is suffering at the present moment more from weariness than anything else. The strain of a tremendous effort has produced an excess of toxins in the body politic, and if the torpor they induce is not overcome, not only may all progress be arrested, but civilisation itself may progressively decline. Civilisation is not a thing which maintains itself. If the will and the effort of the people who desire to live under it and profit by it is missing, civilisation goes back. The International Labour Office is the creation of that moment of relief and hope which followed the end of the war, but it is now involved in the economic complications which

are the symptoms of the world's relapse. It may work on in Geneva, inspired by the preamble to its charter, but it is aware that it cannot pretend to fulfil its mission by shuffling papers. Without widespread will to make it a success and without the constructive support of enlightened public opinion, it, too, must follow the fate of hopes that came to less full fruition.

For further information, lectures and week-end conferences on the International Labour Organisation, apply to the General Secretary, League of Nations Union, 15 Grosvenor Crescent, London, S.W.1.

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